

**Telephone interview with World War II Navy nurse, Helen Pavlovsky Ramsey, 15 April 1994 conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. Mrs. Ramsey had duty at Naval Base Hospital No. 12, Netley, Hants, England.**

**Where are you originally from?**

Originally from Bridgeport, CT, but I grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Delaware. I went to nursing school in New York at Bellevue [Hospital]. That was about the time that we entered the war. Since our fighting men were over there, one of our options was to go over and take care of them. It's remarkable how patriotic we all were, and absolutely amazing when I think about it. We were the only people in blue who were in the European theater, except for the [Navy] nurses who went to Africa. When we arrived in London there already were Army nurses in England. But when the Navy came in it was something different. We created quite a stir.

After we went there, we all felt the same way [about patriotism]. And when we came back almost a year later I had decided that I didn't believe in war. I was a "dove" and a "peacenik." Well, one of the things that has grabbed me since I have been thinking about these things is my attitude since that time. I came back from the service thinking that there's just no excuse for war. We shouldn't be killing one another for any reason. And then I got married and had six children. And one day, looking at my little girls, I said to myself, "If anybody ever tried to harm my daughters, I would kill them and would not have a moment of guilt." So what kind of peacenik is that? Everything is really situational, isn't it? These are some of the thoughts that have been going through my mind as D-Day reunions get closer.

**When did you join the Navy?**

In was in the spring of 1943. I had been in New York. Browning and King was a company that tailor-made naval officers' uniforms. My friends and I were New York when we decided to go into the Navy. Some decided that they should stay home and take care of sick people at home. Of course, those were the choices we had. Since we were in New York and Browning and King made uniforms, we went to them and asked if they could make our Navy uniforms.

That fall I got my orders to go overseas. Our unit was commissioned on January 28, 1944 in New York City. We got to London in February.

**Didn't you go to Lido Beach, Long Island first?**

Yes.

**What was that like?**

It was very interesting. You see, I had grown up on the shore between the Chesapeake Bay and the ocean. The ocean was always a big part of my life. When I went to Lido Beach, NY, at the end of January it was very very cold and the waves came clear up to the porch of the hotel. I had never seen the ocean so angry. It was really an experience.

**You weren't very long at Lido Beach then?**

No. We were there just long enough to mobilize the unit.<sup>1</sup> People kept coming in and we had meetings. Then we had a party for the officers; the officers had a party for all of us. Then in the middle of the night, not knowing where we were going, very secretively, we got on board ship.

**And the ship was the Aquitania.**

Yes. The HMS Aquitania. That was a memorable occasion too. It was the middle of the night and everything was dark. We went down the gangplank toward the ship and the Army band was playing, "Here Comes the Navy." And then as the nurses came by, they played "Lady Be Good." And then when the loudspeakers said the Navy was coming aboard, everybody jumped out of bed and started shaving. The ship had three commands, the sailors and the officers who ran the ship were British. There was also a large number of Army troops. Of course, we just had our own little area and stayed together. The nurses went to sick bay to sit with people who were ill or help out. The rest of the time we could roam as we pleased except when we were called to battle stations, which happened once.

**Did you have staterooms?**

We called them cabins. The cabin I was in had three cots one above the other (like bunk beds) on three sides and one in the center on the floor. There were 10 of us packed into one cabin.

**It must have been pretty crowded.**

It was very crowded. We took turns getting up in the morning. And, of course, we had salt water to bathe with. Someone said at the time that it wasn't exactly a luxury cruise. Most of our people got seasick. This was the middle of January in the North Atlantic. And we pitched and tossed constantly. One of the nurses and I went up on deck and asked the British sailors what we could do to keep from getting sick and they told us to go up on deck early in the morning. The ship was a quarter of mile in length. So if we walked around and back, it was a half a mile. We were told to walk 2 miles a day.

**Did it help?**

It certainly did. We did not get seasick. Psychology may have been a part of it. I don't know.

**What were meals like?**

We had two meals a day. The first meal was porridge. I don't remember what the second one was. But who cared about food in that kind of situation. We were going to do a job. It was amazing how idealistic we were and how patriotic. We knew that our lives were in danger and that we were going to a war zone. Then German reconnaissance planes came over but we didn't know they were reconnaissance planes. They could have shot at us and we were all sent to our

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<sup>1</sup> The unit was designated SNAG 56 and kept that name until it was renamed Base Hospital Number 12 in England.

battle stations. We certainly thought about risking our lives but I think in our youthful optimism, we were willing to. It still amazes me. I think we were aboard ship for 6 days.<sup>2</sup>

**Where did the ship put in?**

We landed at Gourock, in northern Scotland. We got off the ship and got the train to London. It was an overnight trip. Only the nurses went on the train. The men stopped at Londonderry [Northern Ireland] and stayed there until the hospital at Netley was in shape for us.

**How long would that have been?**

We had to live out of suitcases about 3 weeks, but that would have included our stay at Netley until we had laundry facilities there. Maybe we were in London about a week. I remember that after about 6 days at sea with only salt water to bathe and wash our hair in, the first thing our chief nurse did for us was to make appointments for hair shampoos and sets in London. It was such a blessing. I can remember how grateful we were.

**Were you put up in a hotel there?**

The Red Cross provided us with a place to stay.

**Did you get a chance to tour the city?**

Yes. We were free to go where we wanted to and the Red Cross entertained us. They had a dance the very night we came in. Of course, we were so exhausted, we were sure we wouldn't go but we did.

**I guess you could see the damage from the Blitz?**

Oh, yes. Of course when we were in Netley, we experienced the buzz bombs and the V-2s ourselves, and we waited for them. We also experienced some London air-raids.

**From London, you took a train down to Southampton?**

No. We went by troop transport, by truck. The Army brought us. All these arrangements had been made to transport us. We were taking over the hospital from the Army. The Army thought they were going to have the Royal Victoria Hospital but for some reason the Navy was brought in. I have no idea why.

**The Army had been there for awhile, and then they left and you went.**

I don't know how long they had been there. [The Army took over from the British 3 weeks prior to our arrival.]<sup>3</sup> I think they took over from the British and then we came in and took over from them. I don't think the Army was there for any length of time because nothing had been done and they weren't ready for us. However, they did have these trucks that they transported troops in and that's what we came from London to Netley in.

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<sup>2</sup> The Aquitania departed New York on 29 January and arrived at Gourock, Scotland on 5 February.

<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Ramsey's note added later.

**Were the people in Netley very friendly?**

Early on, we got bikes, because that was our way of transportation. In the course of our travels, people were very gracious to us. I remember once traveling along, we stopped when we saw a lady working in her garden. She looked up and said, "Would you like a rose?"

**When you got to England, especially Southampton, it must have looked like the entire country had been taken over by Americans with troops and sailors all over the place.**

That's right. And, of course, overhead were planes constantly flying over.

**You saw the bombers going over?**

Absolutely. They went right overhead.

**When you got to the Royal Victoria Hospital there in Netley, what was your impression of the place?**

Tremendous. It was a monstrosity because one of the stories about it was that Queen Victoria had ordered two hospitals, one in India and one in London and they had gotten the plans mixed up. The story went that the one for India with high ceilings and big windows, and no heating facilities, only fireplaces on either side of a big ward came to England, and the one that was built compactly for England went to India. It was very believable because this was a very cold monstrosity. The seabees came over and remodeled the whole thing to make it useable.

**What did the wards look like?**

They were just huge. I have no idea how many beds there were in a ward. There was a fireplace at either end of it. I came from Bellevue, which is a pretty large hospital. At that time it extended from 26th Street to 34th Street in New York City and was a block wide. The wards we had at Netley were so much bigger than the ones we had at Bellevue.

**But the only thing you had to heat them with was those fireplaces.**

That's right.

**It must have been terribly cold and damp in there.**

It was cold and damp and certainly not conducive to treating patients. But the Seabees did provide us with more heat by changing those wood-burning fireplaces--actually wood was at a premium so they burned a kind of coke. But they converted them to gas and that kept us warmer. Our own sleeping rooms were small. They had fireplaces that were converted to gas heat.

**Were the nurses' quarters in that main building?**

They were in that building but were up on another floor and were kind of a unit in itself.

**Photographs of the building show it to be tremendously long.**

Yes. It was huge. In fact, I have a picture of it where two pictures were taken that met in the middle and put together in order to show the hospital.

**What was your specialty?**

I was an operating room supervisor. I had been an operating room supervisor at Bellevue. As we were preparing for the invasion, I went to see the chief nurse and told her that if it were at all possible, I would like to be in my specialty. I did get to go to the operating room.

**During this time, you were preparing for the invasion. You knew it was going to come, you didn't know when but you were getting ready for it and getting the hospital in shape to receive casualties.**

Yes. But at the same time we were treating patients. We had several hundred (325) patients with a steady flow of admissions.

**Were they Americans or British?**

Mostly British but some were Army. Some were people who had walked on the beach and a grenade exploded or something. Some were accident victims, some were civilians. We took care of whoever was around.

**Some of our photographs of Netley show the bomb shelters on the property.**

Those were gotten ready early on because we were expecting our hospital to be bombed. Certainly the Germans knew we were there and using the facility for invasion purposes.

**Did you ever use the shelters?**

I don't think so. We didn't have to. We had air raid shelter practices so we would know what to do if the air raid sirens went off. But we never had to use them.

**Wasn't it shortly after the invasion that you began getting the buzz bomb attacks?**

Yes. I remember one time a group of us were listening to the radio and we heard a German voice saying that the Americans had started their invasion. And that's about when we became aware of the buzz bombs.<sup>4</sup> Part of our gear included helmets. At the foot of every bed hung a gas mask and helmet--every patient had a helmet. If we were bombed we were to pull the patient off the bed to the floor and push him under the bed, putting their helmet on first. We would hear the buzz bombs whizzing and suddenly the sound would stop and then they fell. But, thank goodness, they all went into Southampton Water and we were spared. Then after the buzz bomb attacks were over, the V-2s began. That's when parts of Southampton were destroyed. One of the things that struck me so emphatically was the British people. They would be bombed out of their homes and they'd salvage what they could and go on with life. I was so impressed with that. They had been very nice to us and we had made friends. They were able to share with us what they had and I just admired their spirit so much.

**From the hospital, you could look out into Southampton Harbor and see all the ships preparing for the invasion.**

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<sup>4</sup> The medical staff of Base Hospital 12 experienced the first V-1 "buzz bomb" on 24 June 1944. In 1946 Helen Pavlovsky described the experience. "The reaction is always the same; everyone automatically waits for the motor to cease, and then a breathless pause of about thirty seconds until the explosion is heard. Someone has again become a victim of the scheming German hatred."

Oh, yes. We saw them forming up the night before. All the ships were gathered in Southampton Water. We didn't have to go upstairs. We could go outside and sit on the waterfront. There were special places with benches where you could watch Southampton Water. At night the water was fluorescent from all the sea life. It was really beautiful. It was really several days before we got any casualties.

**Do you remember the night the ships left?**

Oh, yes. It seems to me it took at least a week for all the ships to gather just outside our hospital. We knew they were gathering for the invasion. The barrage balloons were over each ship and then in one day it seemed like the whole area was full of ships that night and the next morning there was not a single one. We knew the invasion was beginning. We were on alert. We could not leave and were on duty 24 hours a day. We didn't know what we were waiting for. And then the casualties came. I remember the first ships that came in. There was a medical officer who came with one of the ships, a doctor I had worked with at Bellevue. And that incident repeated itself continuously.

**You kept meeting people you knew?**

Yes. Doctors who had interned at Bellevue when we were students there. Now they were naval officers on board the LSTs escorting the wounded to our hospital.

**It was about 3 or 4 days after the invasion that you started receiving casualties?**

At least 3 days.

**Did you meet the first ones that came?**

Yes. They came into my operating room. I remember how busy we were and how they kept coming and coming and we had no place to put them. We put them out in the halls and everywhere.

**Did you do more than emergency treatment for the casualties?**

We were only there as a receiving hospital. We received the casualties, took care of them, removed the bullets and shrapnel, did the debridement, cleaned them up, poured penicillin and sulfa into the wounds, wrapped them up and sent them inland to the Army or sent them to British hospitals inland, or sent them by air to the United States, especially if they were bad burn patients. So we didn't keep them very long. The operating room nurses would pitch in and help the doctors do debridements and remove bullets. I still have the first bullet I had removed myself and have managed to keep it for many years.

Anyway, we were busy and we never thought about food or sleep or anything else. The doctors as well as the nurses and corpsmen were taking care of patients. We did not sleep for the first 24 hours, and then finally sleep had to be rationed because no one would leave their work. The captain issued an order letting certain ones off to get some sleep. And then when they came back others would go. Our food was brought to us in surgery. We lived on sandwiches and coffee for a long time. When we had a minute, we would grab a bite. And that's the way we handled the first 24 hours. As the casualty load lightened, things got back to a decent pace.

**You said that in surgery, you were using sulfa and penicillin. Was this the first time you had used penicillin?**

We didn't use it at Bellevue and that was one of the foremost hospitals in the states. At Netley we got it immediately. We had these little tin cans that looked like salt shakers. Of course, they were sterilized. And a mixture of penicillin and, I'm sure, sulfathiazole, were mixed and we would just use them like salt shakers and sprinkle it into the wounds. And I've read since, that it was that mixture of sulfa and penicillin used in those early days that saved many a limb and kept infections down to almost zero. They were both miracle drugs.

**You also gave the penicillin intravenously, didn't you?**

Oh, yes. But sprinkling was just the immediate way we used it on the wounds.

**Did you work for more than one surgeon?**

Yes. We had many surgeons. We had two operating room theaters, one upstairs and one downstairs. At first, we started out with one and then we required two because we just couldn't handle all the casualties in one theater. When I say theater, I mean several rooms, each room with its own surgeons, nurses, and corpsmen. It was one big unit. I was in charge of the one downstairs.

**We have a photograph in our Netley file showing Admiral Stark [Harold R., Commander, Naval forces Europe] visiting the hospital and talking with the patients.**

He was very much impressed with the job that we did and said so a number of times.

**How long was it before things calmed down at the hospital?**

We received casualties fairly steadily but not at the rate we did at the beginning. And the reason is this. As soon as the troops landed on the beaches and went farther inland, the Army went right in and set up their field hospitals so they could do a lot of the immediate work that we were having to do at the beginning. And that took a load off of us. As the war moved further away from our immediate area, the blackout was gradually lifted and then we were given free opportunities to travel. We could check out an Army jeep and go to places like Stratford-on-Avon and wherever we wanted to go. We went to London, etc. But this was all months after the invasion. If we had time off on a weekend, we were able to travel about and see a little bit of England.

**When did you leave Netley?**

I think it was around September [1944]. And we didn't all go back at the same time. I came back on the USS Wakefield [AP-21]. We left Bristol and took a southern route to the Azores. Somewhere in the ocean we turned north toward Boston. But we had lovely weather and there were absolutely gorgeous days and nights on the ocean. It was the most fantastic journey I have ever made anywhere.

Of course we were going back home but only half of us. Others stayed to close up and we were missing our friends and Navy buddies. As we were closing up shop, we had the freedom to travel a bit. When I say this, I don't mean we didn't put in 8-hour days of duty. In the summer, the evenings in Britain were long. It was daylight till about midnight and then it was daylight at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. And just because you had eaten your dinner didn't mean that you didn't have a big, long evening in which to do things. It was really delightful. You can imagine working in what we considered very important duty dealing with life and death and we had bonded together, the officers and nurses. There was a bond of camaraderie and here

we had been separated from some of our very best friends. So our returning home was sad. It would have been better had our whole unit gone home together as we had gone over together.

Once we got to Boston, we separated. Most of us were calling home, calling boyfriends and girlfriends and from Boston we had transportation. I had a month's leave and I went home to the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Then we had an opportunity to request our next tour of duty. I requested duty in the Pacific on a hospital ship and I guess that wonderful sea journey home had a lot to do with it.

**Were you then assigned to a hospital ship?**

Yes, but we had to stay in the states for a year after being on active duty (for health reasons). I was sent to the West Coast in preparation for my requested duty and was at Mare Island for a year. By then the war was over and I determined that I was going to go back to school to the University of Maryland and take pre-med because I had done enough surgery as a nurse to know that I was able to become a surgeon if I chose. One of the doctors I worked with told me that if I ever finished school I could always come to Akron and work with him to get experience. Having someone else to believe in me was enough. So I requested an honorable resignation to go back to school.

I then went back to school and had a year more of pre-med and was already accepted at Harvard Medical School when Fred Ramsey came to College Park [MD] and asked me to marry him. I said yes, came to a small town in West Virginia, and had six children.